

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

Porter J. Goss

Testimony Before the Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

on H.R. 3390, the Atlantic Highly Migratory Species Conservation Act

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Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to be here this morning to discuss H.R. 3390, the Atlantic Highly Migratory Species Conservation Act. For me, this bill is an excellent model for how conservation issues should be addressed. Unfortunately, as my colleagues well know, most environmental debates are often politicized for partisan gain and have little to do with substance or solutions. It is not often that combatants in conservation issues can put aside their differences long enough to come to a consensus agreement that will benefit both parties and ensure meaningful protection for our resources. So, I am delighted to be here today with what I hope is a constructive solution to a very real problem. The consensus reflected in H.R. 3390 will greatly enhance the conservation of billfishes and facilitate rebuilding of the swordfish stocks. In the fall of 1998, representatives of four groups began a discussion that has resulted in the bill I introduced. The Coastal Conservation Association, the American Sportfishing Association, The Billfish Foundation and the Blue Water Fisherman's Association have come together to address the decline of Atlantic billfishes and the increase in catches of juvenile swordfish.

HR 3390 will close some 160,000 square miles to pelagic longlining in the South Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico. These closures, developed from scientific analysis done by independent scientists and the National Marine Fisheries Service, cover a broad spectrum of conservation benefits without unduly disrupting the swordfish longlining industry. The areas were selected because of the high concentration of small swordfish catch and billfish by-catch.

The Atlantic closed area extends from my Southwest Florida district at Sanibel Island south to Key West, then north all the way to the South Carolina North Carolina boarder. This area will produce the lion's share of the conservation and economic benefit from this bill. The closure is permanent and will significantly reduce the catch of small swordfish and sailfish bycatch. Portions of the Gulf will see a three-month closure that accomplishes similar objectives.

Although no one has computed the exact economic benefit of the legislation, there is no question that it will be a huge boost for the economy of my home state of Florida and, ultimately, the nation. Florida is the number one marine recreational fishing state in the country. That activity cannot be sustained without healthy populations of fish. The benefits from the Atlantic closure will make the East Coast of Florida one

of the premier sailfish fisheries in the world.

These benefits do not come without a cost, however. In order to get this level of economic and conservation benefit, the legislation makes 68 longline vessels eligible for buy-out of the vessel's fishing permits. In return for the buy-out, the longlining vessels are forever foreclosed from returning to this fishery or any other commercial fishing worldwide. Payment for the buyout comes from a combination of Treasury funds, consumers of swordfish and a fee imposed on recreational fishermen.

The legislation also includes a bycatch reduction research program. The three-year program will direct scientists, sponsored by both the commercial industry and recreational groups, to develop measurable methods to further reduce bycatch in the longline fishery. There is a special emphasis in the mid-Atlantic to monitor displacement of vessels and propose ways to remedy it.

I said earlier that the bill is not perfect. Indeed, I have yet to see a perfect piece of legislation. No group is going to get all they want in this legislation but, taken as a whole, this is a good piece of legislation that addresses a real conservation problem. We should not pass up this opportunity.

I commend the groups that have signed the agreement and I am particularly proud to sponsor this legislation because of my respect for the work of the Coastal Conservation Association. In my state of Florida, CCA has always led the charge in the fight to protect our marine resources and I am pleased to see that commendable record of accomplishment continue.

Mr. Chairman, I know that you have legislation that would expand the buyout area envisioned in H.R. 3390. I commend you for that effort. I remain hopeful that throughout the legislative process as we move this bill toward passage, we will maintain the delicately balanced compromise that produced the agreement to close these fisheries.

Once again, I want to thank the Chairman and the other members of the committee for the opportunity to appear before you this morning. Thank you.

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